

“New Dawn Blooms”

A homily delivered by the Reverend Alison Miller

April 4, 2021, Morristown UU Fellowship

Holidays are interwoven with the milestones of our lives – baby’s first Christmas, the Thanksgiving with the empty chair, the New Year’s Eve with the new job, the Passover people tiptoed around the diagnosis, the Easter during COVID.

For those who come to a congregation, like this one, we have the added support of being able to explore the meaning of holidays not only in our families, but also in a larger communal context. We know that personal and collective grief and joy are present at every holiday table and in every sanctuary and Zoom room. The holidays grow multilayered and multifaceted as we experience them against the backdrop of what amounts to our lives or our world at the moment. No holiday is about one theme. They all contain rich and varied spiritual questions that come into sharp relief or fade into the background depending upon the year.

Look at this Easter we are celebrating in a liminal time – in between the grip of a pandemic and slowly returning to a new normal. It is our second virtual Easter, and we certainly didn’t want to still be separated. The rates of infection in our area are high enough that some of you may be in quarantine right now.

Who will roll away the stone that keeps us in a tomb of death?

Yet, in Morris County, where a number of us live – 61% of adults 65 and over are vaccinated, 33% of people 18 and over are vaccinated, and children and youth are being included in trials. We have great cause to be hopeful. Some of you were able to be with family or friends this week celebrating Holi, or Passover, or Easter.

Easter is a time of grief and joy, death and resurrection, oppression and liberation, whimsy and solemnity. Today is a day awash in the warmth of spring, buds popping, and post basket sugar highs.

April 4th also happens to be the 53rd anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in a year filled with examples of violence against black bodies in a week where we fear that George Floyd’s murderer, Derek Chauvin, may not be held to account.

Who will roll away the stone that keeps us in a tomb of death?

We recall the story of Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of Jesus arriving at a tomb full of grief ready to perform the ritual of anointing their dead. To their surprise, the stone had been moved and the tomb was empty. Jesus was nowhere to be found. They were left like so many people were this year having to adapt and figure out new ways to hold their grief and honor beloveds now gone.

According to the gospel of Mark, the earliest written gospel, when the two women arrive at the tomb, instead of Jesus' body, they find a young man in a white robe who tells them Jesus is no longer there in the spot where he had been laid after he was crucified. *Did the young man roll away the stone?*

And, Where did he say Jesus went? The young man says, Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him, just as he had foretold.

Then, the two Mary's flee from the tomb in terror, saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Then, in this version, the original ending of the gospel of Mark, the story ends on that note of fear. Fear is the last word of the text.

There is a depth and truth to this oldest, original ending to the story of Jesus. The Mary's and all the followers are left wrestling with grief, uncertain about what to do next, and afraid.

We have all been there at some point and experienced that ending. But, it isn't only the ending. It's also a new beginning, if in spite of being afraid, we, the living, do not stay attached to the stone at the entrance of the tomb. Someone may have physically moved away the stone, but it is our spiritual work to let it go. Or else we remain stuck in the tomb and in a winter of the soul.

As the young man in the white robe wisely said – Jesus isn't here, and you won't find him here no matter how long you wait. He has gone ahead of you to Galilee. Galilee is the place where the two Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of Jesus come from.

If they have the courage to roll away the metaphorical stones that hold them enthralled to this devastating death and to move to the place where their lives can unfold – that is where they will encounter Jesus again.

He will be there when they give thanks for their daily bread in the words he taught them. He will be there when they look upon his brother James and see in him a gesture or an attitude that comes from knowing his brother. They will find him reflected in their own deeds of courage and compassion as they freely follow his example.

We, Unitarian Universalists, focus on Jesus' life and his healing ministries rather than on his death because we believe that is the closest we can come to knowing his light and wisdom and in turn coming to know that light and wisdom within ourselves.

I love to stay in the house beside the graveyard where my parents are buried. I like to sit on the natural stone set above their ashes and acknowledge that there is a part of me that will always miss them. I appreciate that place set aside for remembering them.

However, they mostly re-appear to me in moments when I am carrying on a legacy that I suspect they too carried on for and with others. When I'm caring for my son, or laughing with him, or working through upset with him... When I'm organizing for equity, I can feel the presence of my mother the union organizer... When I'm lost in a hobby that brings life meaning and joy, I feel the presence of my father who loved stamp collecting, a window onto art and history. Those are the times they are most alive to me and I can say that as long as I am here, a part of them always will be too.

Holy Week, Good Friday, and up through Holy Saturday are the memorials we have created in time to mourn that prophets are often killed by the state – Jesus, Gandhi, King, Chavez - and to remember how they healed sickness, dined with the outcasts, turned over the tables of power, and followed the call of love even if it meant risking their life.

The light of Easter will not dawn there by a memorial, or in the shade of a tomb. Easter dawns only when we leave that place and heed the voice of the man or the angel or God or our conscience saying, “your beloved person or prophet is not here... go and you will find them among the living.”

They are found in the movements and the moments that remind you of what they stood for and that you too are a part of it, a part of them, and they are a part of you.

As Amanda Gorman exhorts, “When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid. The new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light. If only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

Easter comes when in the midst of fear and uncertainty, we close the gospel and get going about the business of making the world more beautiful, more just, and more whole.

Easter comes when we live out of a place of confidence that in spite of all odds love will be reborn again and again and is the one thing that can never be defeated.

When hope seems lost, love rises up and takes her place.

May it be so. Happy Easter!